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## **Meeting at the threshold, at the edge of the carpet or somewhere in between? Questions of ceremonial in princely India**

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# Meeting at the threshold, at the edge of the carpet or somewhere in between?<sup>1</sup>

## Questions of ceremonial in princely India

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*In the interaction between Indian princes and British political officers, ceremonial played a prominent part, especially in forms of salutation and seating arrangements. Hence, the question of a British Resident, quoted in the title of this article, on the proper ceremonial at a Maharaja's visit. The Political Department felt convinced that ceremonial, 'a bit of bunting' in Lord Lytton's patronising words, met a deeply felt oriental need for pomp and circumstance. Some officers, however, acknowledged that in princely states, the maintenance of regal splendour could be more important than sound administration. Similar shades of opinion can be found among social scientists studying court ceremonial. Is ceremonial the handmaiden of political power or is it rather the other way round?*

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### Introduction

A common metaphor for the South Asian region is the multi-coloured mosaic. In the course of centuries many migrant groups forced their way into the subcontinent and entered into cultural interactions with the people already settled there. In consequence, the region harbours a great variety of ethnic communities, linguistic families and religious doctrines. It meant a formidable task for the British colonial government to establish a proper administrative control of that diverse multitude. To serve that purpose, a large state project of enumeration and classification was started after the middle of the nineteenth century. Historians have extensively

<sup>1</sup> This title is derived from a letter by the Resident of Mysore, 1 July 1905, asking headquarters for information on the ceremonial to be observed at exchange visits between the Governor of Madras and the Maharaja of Mysore, in 'Ceremonial on Official Visits, 1905', in Oriental and India Office Collections (OIOC) of the British Library, London. Funds for travel and research in London were kindly granted by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO), The Hague.

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studied this counting of Indian religions and castes in their search for an explanation of the emergence of new identities. Groups that had been defined for bureaucratic purposes began to behave as communities, as the government was distributing political, educational and employment benefits along these official lines of demarcation. The result was not only the construction of new identities, but also social tension and conflict.

British India did not cover the whole subcontinent. Before Independence (1947), about two-fifths of Indian territory and one-fourth of the entire population had remained under indirect rule in states headed by Indian princes. It was impossible to travel from the Himalayas in the north to Cape Kanyakumari in the extreme south without time and again crossing the territory of an Indian Raja, Maharaja or Nawab. There were no less than 600 of these states, the majority tiny and insignificant like the hundreds of 'village-states' in Kathiawad; but some of them, like Hyderabad and Kashmir, of similar size to England and France. They may have been an enrichment of the total mosaic, but did not ease administrative control. Existing as a political system alongside directly ruled British India, the princely states differed so widely among themselves that uniform treatment of them was difficult, if not impossible. Here, again, there was a need for bureaucratic classification and the construction of some hierarchical order. This relationship between princely India and the British paramount power forms the main subject of this article, focusing on ceremonial as a constitutive part of that relationship.

Some of these princely states date back from the time before the establishment of the Mughal dynasty in Delhi which ruled over large parts of India until 1857. Others had come up as the result of a resistance movement against Mughal dominance or were founded by a dissident Mughal elite. Together they represented a wide array of political forces, held together by what has been called the cultural-symbolic constitution of India that made them render at least a formal allegiance to the Mughal emperor. That constitution embraced diverse elements including classificatory schemes, legal codes, ceremonial procedures and rules of etiquette. The bestowal of a robe of honour in court from the hands of the Mughal ruler became central to this system of fealty. According to Buckler, it rested on the idea that the king, by the donning of clothes (*khelat*), incorporated into his body the persons of those who shared his rule. The reciprocal of the receipt of *khelat* was the offering of *nazar*, gold coins, and other presents, the amount and value being carefully graded and related to the rank of the person making the representation.<sup>2</sup>

That constellation of political forces was continually in a state of flux, especially when the Mughal empire was increasingly losing control. Weaker states were crushed on the battlefield and bad rulers were forced to flee after internal rebellion or a revolution in a palace wing. Under British influence these political relations gradually lost their dynamic and became more rigid. Some Indian princes saw

<sup>2</sup> B.S. Cohn, 'Representing Authority in Victorian India', in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds, *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge, 1983, p. 173; M.N. Pearson, ed., *Legitimacy and Symbols: The South Asian Writings of F.W. Buckler*, Ann Arbor, 1985, p. 179; Stewart Gordon, ed., *Robes and Honor: The Medieval World of Investiture*, New York, 2001.

their territories annexed by the East India Company, with others it was thought more prudent to conclude a treaty. Under these treaties, the princes maintained internal independence, but had to hand over their foreign policy and military defence to the British in return for a guarantee that their throne would be saved. With all these treaty states, the colonial government maintained an individual relationship, which was determined not only by the text of their treaties, but also by what came to be called 'a mixture of history, theory and modern facts'.<sup>3</sup> Ceremonial played a prominent part in that relationship.

With the growth of the East India Company's power, the treaties changed from alliances of mutual equality into relations of protective subordination. In the more important states, the colonial government was represented by Residents. The position of these political officers gradually changed. In 1789 Governor-General Cornwallis expected the Indian princes to consider the Residents at their courts as 'representatives of a government at least equal in power and dignity to their own', but in the first part of the nineteenth century that policy was abandoned. Residents and other political officers were no longer representatives of an allied government, but assumed the duties of guardians on behalf of a politically and military superior power. No simple task, as John Malcolm observed in 1821: 'to possess power, but seldom to exercise it'.<sup>4</sup> That dilemma was never to be fully solved.

After 1857 the Government of India passed from the East India Company to the British Crown. The annexation of Indian states and their territories came to an end. The task of carrying on relations with the remaining states rested with a Foreign Department that stood immediately under the Viceroy (Governor-General). Later, that responsibility was transferred to a Political Department, indicating that the princely states were increasingly seen as part of internal affairs.

From the second half of the nineteenth century, the Crown of England stood forth as the unquestioned ruler and paramount power in all India. Yet, the British were perfectly aware that they were a small minority. They ruled not only a vast and variegated population, but also a large number of greater and smaller princes who still thought themselves entitled to positions of independent authority in their own right. If the British tried to crush all remaining ambitions, they would risk uniting the princes and their subject populations in a joint opposition against them. But if they fostered pride of rank and position, they would encourage pretensions of independence, which they were unable to gratify. Lord Lytton was one of the first and most prominent Viceroys to take up the administrative challenge of regulating British relations with the Indian princes.

Lytton was appointed to that lofty position in 1876. Although absolutely ignorant in matters relating to India, 'knowing nothing of India except its myths', as he frankly admitted, he became convinced the same year that the princes were a powerful aristocracy, which could be used to strengthen the stability of British

<sup>3</sup> *Report of the Indian States Committee, 1928-1929*, London, 1929. pp. 23, 26.

<sup>4</sup> Correspondence of Georg, First Marquis of Cornwallis, and Instructions by Sir John Malcolm, quoted in Adrian Sever, ed., *Documents and Speeches on the Indian Princely States*, Delhi, 1985, Vol. I, pp. 86, 141.

rule. As a matter of course, they could not be granted any independent political power. 'Fortunately for us, however,' Lytton wrote to the Secretary of State for India, Lord Salisbury, 'they are easily affected by sentiment, and susceptible to the influence of symbols to which facts very inadequately correspond'. What he had in mind was the conferring of ceremonial distinctions as titles, the number of gun salutes in their honour, and precedence at state receptions. In explanation, the just-arrived Viceroy confided to the Secretary of State: 'The further East you go, the greater becomes the importance of a bit of bunting'.<sup>5</sup>

Lytton had his great moment at the turn of the years 1876–77, when he invited an impressive array of Indian princes, chiefs and other dignitaries to Delhi to announce Queen Victoria's assumption of the new title of *Kaiser-i-Hind*. Extremely satisfied with this theatrical enterprise, he reported to Prime Minister Disraeli that the bestowal of small marks of honour on a ruling family, such as the right to a return visit from the Viceroy or a more honourable place in *darbar*, were quite as highly prized and appreciated as the more substantial benefits of augmented territory or revenue conferred in earlier times upon their family by an Aurangzeb or an Akbar.<sup>6</sup> 'Rank and ceremonial,' as Nuckolls points out, 'were cheaper expedients as instruments of authority than soldiers and bullets'.<sup>7</sup>

In spite of the richness of the available historical material, rank and ceremonial have remained a rather neglected area of study in British relations with princely India. In the early days of Company rule, the British sought to maintain much of the existing feudal ceremonial as part of their attempt to take over the nominal authority of the Mughal. But as Bernard Cohn has shown, the meaning of robing shifted from incorporation to subordination, and the offering of presents was restricted as it was seen as a form of bribery.

The fall of the Mughal empire resolved the contradiction of two co-existing cultural-symbolic centres, Mughal and British. A new order was ushered in, which required new means by which Indians could relate to the now dominant British power. Henceforth, the Indian states' relations with the Crown were ranked in a hierarchy determined by objective data like their size and amount of revenue, the history of their political relations with the Mughal and the British, and a number of symbolic and ceremonial distinctions to which Indian rulers, in Lytton's opinion, were so susceptible.<sup>8</sup>

An important contribution to the study of these ceremonials was made in the 1990 special issue of *Modern Asian Studies* on civil ritual in India, which contained several case studies on official interactions between British officers and Indian rulers. The present article may be seen as an attempt to resume that discussion.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in the memorial volume by his daughter, Lady Betty Balfour, *Lord Lytton's Indian Administration 1876–80: An Untold History*, Delhi, 1988 (reprint), pp. 4, 110. See also Cohn, 'Representing Authority', p. 192.

<sup>6</sup> Letter from Lytton to Disraeli, 30 Apr. 1877, in Balfour, *Lord Lytton's Indian Administration*, p. 108.

<sup>7</sup> Charles W. Nuckolls, 'The Darbar Incident', *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 24 (3), 1990, p. 531.

<sup>8</sup> Cohn, 'Representing Authority', pp. 172, 180.

Ed Haynes is presently working along similar lines with his research on different ways of presenting honour in Indian princely states after 1858, from orders of distinction to the award of medals and decorations.<sup>9</sup>

### Ceremonial

Matters of ceremonial were not laid down in a standard manual of the British administration. As practices and customs in the many princely courts differed widely, much was left to the discretion of the responsible officer on the spot. Yet, the selective conferment of distinctions by the paramount power was definitely meant to hierarchise the princes and chiefs in an administrative system that was easier to handle, as may also become clear from later attempts at regulation.<sup>10</sup> In the following pages I intend to analyse the relations between Indian princes and British political officers, with special emphasis on the ceremonial element. For that purpose I will make use of the conceptual apparatus that has been developed by Erving Goffman.<sup>11</sup> The concepts of Goffman, which are partly derived from the French sociologist Emile Durkheim, lent themselves reasonably well for a study of the ceremonial exchange between prince and political officer.

Goffman makes a distinction between substantive rules and ceremonial rules. Substantive rules guide conduct in regard to matters felt to have significance in their own right, as for instance rules for the protection of property. The code which governs substantive rules comprises law and morality. Ceremonial rules guide conduct in matters felt to have secondary significance. They have their primary importance as a conventionalised means of communication by which the individual expresses his own character or conveys his appreciation of the other participants in the situation. The code that covers ceremonial rules is incorporated in what is called etiquette. Goffman refers to linguistic, gestural and spatial forms of expression, which together form the ceremonial idiom. In the interaction between Indian princes and British officers, this ceremonial idiom plays a prominent part, especially in the forms of salutation and observance of spatial distance. Hence, the urgent question of a British Resident, quoted in the title of this article, whether the Governor of Madras had to meet a visiting Maharaja at the threshold, at the edge of the carpet, or somewhere in between.

According to Goffman, ceremonial relations can be symmetrical as well as asymmetrical. Therefore, he does not refer to power as a factor to enforce certain forms of deference and demeanour. Anna Byrson, on the other hand, states that

<sup>9</sup> Special Issue of *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 24 (3), 1990. Ed Haynes, *Indirect Izzar: Representing Honor in the Indian 'Princely' States, 1858–1970*, unpublished paper.

<sup>10</sup> See for instance the 'Proceedings of the Committee on Ceremonials 1932', R/2/508/150, in OIOC, London. On the lack of uniform principles, see C.L. Tupper, comp., *Indian Political Practice, a collection of the decisions of the Government of India in political cases*, Calcutta, 1895, Vol. III, p. 239.

<sup>11</sup> Erving Goffman, 'The Nature of Deference and Demeanor', *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 58, 1956, pp. 473–502.

'relations of dominance and submission are implicit within the code of manners'.<sup>12</sup> Goffman does implicitly acknowledge the power factor when he observes that 'to be pointedly refused an expected act of deference is often a way of being told that open insurrection has begun'.<sup>13</sup> He also refers to frictions that might arise when people with incompatible ceremonial idioms enter into contact or when an individual is accorded deference of a misidentifying kind, especially when it places him in a lower position than he thinks right.

Many British felt convinced that ceremonial, 'a bit of bunting' in Lytton's patronising words, met a deeply felt oriental need for pomp and circumstance. Maharajas and their less prominent brother princes were thought to be obsessed not only with large collections of elephants and Rolls Royces, but also with splendour and decorum. Butler, a former secretary to the Political Department, was also inclined to regard political ceremonial as primarily ornamental in nature, but he insisted that young political officers should follow a course of lectures on political ceremonial and 'all those graceful courtesies of manner and conduct to which Indians attach supreme importance'.<sup>14</sup> Former Resident Barton, on the other hand, was virtually anticipating the later concept of the theatre state, when he wrote that in some princely states, the maintenance of regal splendour was more important than sound administration.<sup>15</sup>

This difference of opinion among British political officers can also be found among social scientists who study court ceremonial. Some of these scholars focus their analysis exclusively on the structures of political power and consider ceremonial and etiquette as a subordinate ornament without any relevance. This applies especially to Norbert Elias and his followers who regard court ceremonial as primarily moulded by a political agenda, meant to make power relations visible and to propagate the illustrious position of the ruler.<sup>16</sup> Goffman also seems to understand ceremonial basically as an expression of an underlying power constellation, even though he does not make that point explicit. An opposite viewpoint has been formulated by Clifford Geertz in his well-known study of Bali as a theatre state. He argues that ritual and ceremonial in Bali are not meant to support political power, but rather political power is in the service of the performance of ritual.<sup>17</sup> Geertz is referring to large, religious rituals organised by the state. There is no lack of similar rituals in India, but here I want to restrict myself to the secular ceremonial, like the 1819 imperial coronation of Awadh. In his examination of this event, Michael Fisher concludes that the ruler of Awadh relied on a

<sup>12</sup> Anna Byrson, *From Courtesy to Civility: Changing Codes of Conduct in Early Modern England*, Oxford, 1998, p. 16.

<sup>13</sup> Goffman, 'Deference and Demeanor', p. 480.

<sup>14</sup> *Report of the Indian States Committee*, p. 39.

<sup>15</sup> W. Barton, *The Princes of India*, London, 1934, p. 65.

<sup>16</sup> Norbert Elias, *Die Höfische Gesellschaft*, Neuwied und Berlin, 1969, Ch. V, especially pp. 135–37.

<sup>17</sup> Clifford Geertz, *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth-century Bali*, Princeton, 1980, especially pp. 132–36.



ceremony to enhance his position vis-à-vis the Mughal emperor rather than to legitimise political gains already achieved.<sup>18</sup>

Is ceremonial the handmaiden of political power or is it rather the other way round? That question refers to two extreme positions, the ceremonial of power versus the power of ceremonial, but fortunately, much space is left in between. Many historians, as for instance David Cannadine, consider ceremonial as an integral part of the political process and the structure of power. Politics and ceremonial are not separate subjects, the one serious, the other superficial, but closely intertwined. Therefore, he concludes that '(r)itual is not the mask of force but is itself a type of power'.<sup>19</sup> He is supported in this by Edward Haynes, who calls ritual and symbolism important means of establishing political control, and Douglas Haynes, who defines them as 'critical sites for the constitution of political authority'.<sup>20</sup> More recently, John Adamson has called for a new court history to emancipate 'court culture from crudely functionalist modes of analysis'.<sup>21</sup>

From the perspective as outlined by these authors, I want to investigate the ceremonial exchange between British officers and the several major and minor princes that ruled in India before 1947. For that purpose I will analyse empirical data from a number of hitherto largely untapped documentary files preserved in the Oriental and India Office Collections of the British Library related to official visits and durbars, in particular the forms of salutation and the allocation of seats. Durbars were central institutions for ceremonial interaction and enjoyed much coverage in the written documentation that has been left by the colonial administration and the princely courts. The princes proved very sensitive to the influence durbar ceremonial might have on their subjects, but its actual impact on the population is more difficult to ascertain.

The first question is how the administrative classification of Indian states affected the position of the princes. What did it mean to their mutual relations and their attitude to the British paramount power? The next question is how different types of power, from military to ceremonial, were mutually related. The great variety among the states and the long time period studied here will enable us to discuss the relations between the different types of power in their actual, always changing, context. Finally, I want to raise the question as to what extent the British rulers themselves were preoccupied by questions of ceremonial.

<sup>18</sup> Michael H. Fisher, 'The Imperial Coronation of 1819: Awadh, the British and the Mughals', *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 19(2), 1985.

<sup>19</sup> David Cannadine and Simon Price, eds, *Rituals of Royalty: Power and Ceremonial in Traditional Societies*, Cambridge, 1987, pp. 6, 12, 19.

<sup>20</sup> Edward Haynes, 'Rajput Ceremonial Interactions as a Mirror of a Dying Indian State System, 1820–1947', and Douglas Haynes, 'Imperial Ritual in a Local Setting: The Ceremonial Order in Surat, 1890–1939', *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 24(3), 1990, pp. 460–62, 525.

<sup>21</sup> John Adamson, ed., *The Princely Courts of Europe: Ritual, Politics and Culture under the Ancient Regime 1500–1750*, London, 1999, p. 40.

### Stairs as Visual Hierarchy

In 1872 the Governor of Bombay received a number of Indian princes at the Government House in Parel, on the edge of Bombay City. At that time, the Political Department of Bombay was still in charge of maintaining relations with about 300, mainly minor states in western India. Later, responsibility for these states shifted from Bombay to the jurisdiction of the Government of India. The visits to the Governor are reported in detail in the *Bombay Political Gazette*, which mentions His Highness the Maharaja Scindia of Gwalior as the Governor's most prominent guest. After the British-Indian contingent in this important Mahratta state had mutinied in 1857, the Maharaja had sought refuge in Agra. Later he was reinstated by British power, exposing his critical dependence on the colonial government. On his visit, on 11 November 1872, we get the following information.

The Maharaja was escorted from his private residence to the Government House by two carriages containing the private and military secretaries to His Excellency the Governor and an Aide-de-camp. The carriages were also attended by an escort of the Poona Horse under European officers. On arrival at Government House, 19 gun salutes were fired<sup>22</sup> and a guard of honour composed of British infantry presented arms. At the foot of the stairs, the Maharaja was received by the secretary to the Political Department of the Government of Bombay, who conducted him into the durbar room at the threshold of which the Governor received the Maharaja. The Governor conducted the prince to a seat on his right hand; to the right of the prince was seated the Political Agent who represented the Government of Bombay in Gwalior state; and on the left of the Governor, the political secretary took his seat. The sirdars of Gwalior were presented to the Governor by the Political Agent, with a military band playing in the background. At the close of the visit, *pan supari* was served to the Maharaja by the Governor and likewise to his attendants, according to their rank, by the secretary and the private secretary. The Governor took leave at the threshold and the political secretary took leave at the foot of the staircase. Once more salutes were fired and the Maharaja left, escorted by the Poona Horse to his own residence.

Two days later, the Governor paid a return visit to the Maharaja of Gwalior. This visit closely resembled the earlier one. The Maharaja also offered his guest the seat of honour to his right. For Europeans the right hand signified the support and protection which should be available to a superior in rank, whereas a Hindu turns his right side to an object of worship and reserves his left hand for matters considered impure. Although the ceremonial idioms thus differed, in actual practice they concurred. To the left of the Maharaja, the Political Agent was seated and to the right of the Governor, the political secretary, thus exactly mirroring the seating arrangements on the earlier visit. *Uttur* and *pan* were served, this time by the

<sup>22</sup> The more important princely states were entitled to a number of gun salutes on official occasions, varying from nine to 21 salutes. In 1872 only three states had been granted a permanent or dynastic salute of 21 guns, i.e., Hyderabad, Baroda and Mysore. See Tupper, *Indian Political Practice*, Vol. III, pp. 233–36.

Maharaja to the Governor and by the sirdars of Gwalior to the members of the Governor's staff.

More important than the similarities were the differences. First of all, the Governor was escorted by a detachment of his own bodyguard and only at the outskirts of Parel were two principal officers of Gwalior waiting to escort him to the Maharaja's residence. Then, the Maharaja met the Governor at the foot of the stairs and conducted him upstairs into the durbar room. This arrangement precluded a passing moment of spatial subordination of the Governor to the Indian prince and carried the message that the representative of the paramount power was always the superior. Reports of this and other visits extensively document the time of arrival, order of precedence, seating arrangements and exchange of courtesies. But there is no mention of any discussion. After the exchange of some friendly conversation, *pan* and *uttur* were served and then the guest and his suite took leave.<sup>23</sup> This may remind us of Goffman's observation that ceremonial does not offer an opportunity for communication, but is a form of communication itself.

Of course, the visit by the Maharaja of Gwalior was not the result of a spontaneous impulse. In the previous months, the programme had been carefully drawn up by the private secretary and political secretary of Bombay after consideration of the protocol observed during earlier visits as recorded in the *Gazette of the Government of India*. Next, the programme had been submitted to the Maharaja by Colonel Hutchinson, the Political Agent at Gwalior court. The Maharaja had objected that the Governor was to receive him at the threshold of the durbar room without coming into the ante-room at the top of the stairs. He called it a matter of utmost importance and referred to his visit to the Governor in Poona, where that distinction had been granted to him.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, he expressed his unwillingness to descend the stairs of his house to receive the Governor on the latter's return visit. The British argued that the Poona ceremonial was without precedent and could not be repeated. If conceded, all the other chiefs in Bombay would ask for the same and that, they assumed, would not suit the Maharaja's wish. In the end, the Maharaja of Gwalior had to acquiesce in the form of salutation as described above.

That is not to say that the choreography of this ceremonial was typical of princely India. From sixteenth-century Rome this form of salutation had spread over large parts of Europe. In seventeenth-century Versailles, for instance, the famous 'escalier des ambassadeurs' registered precisely the status of diplomats and other guests, according to how far the king or his representative was pleased to descend the staircase to greet them.

After the dispute with Gwalior, it was decided that henceforth when receiving a Governor, a prince would descend the stairs on to the lowest floor.<sup>25</sup> This decision applied to all princes, but that did not mean that all visits followed a uniform

<sup>23</sup> *Bombay Political Gazette*, 28 Nov. 1872, pp.1218–21.

<sup>24</sup> So it was recorded indeed in *Bombay Political Gazette*, 31 Aug. 1871, p. 939.

<sup>25</sup> 'Precedence and Ceremonial 1870–74', R/2/489/75, in OIOC, London.

pattern. The British distributed privilege unequally among the princes, with the result that after 1857, a hierarchical order emerged that laid down the position of all rulers. In that way, just as in the case of caste, the earlier mobility was contained by a rigid system that was scrupulously watched by British officers. The Raja of Rajpeeppla, for instance, ruler of a small state in Kathiawad, was accorded a much less honourable reception in November 1872, which fitted his humble position. Only one carriage with an Aide-de-camp to the Governor escorted him to Parel, where he was saluted by 11 guns. At the top of the staircase, he was met by the undersecretary to the Political Department, who conducted him into the durbar room, at the entrance of which he was met by the secretary to that Department. The Governor made no step forward but received him in the durbar room, standing on the carpet. Princes of even smaller states were not met by any political officer and had to enter the durbar room all alone. Among these princes there was an unmistakable urge to upward mobility which expressed itself in a striving after the status attributes of higher ranked princes, like the right to a return visit by the Governor, or a higher number of gun salutes.

In the exceptional case of a female ruler heading a state, the same ceremonial was followed. At the end of the nineteenth century, the state of Bhopal in central India was reigned over by a Begum. She strictly observed the rules of purdah and never appeared in public. Viceroy Lord Lansdowne, who visited the state in 1891, was allowed a glance at her through the carriage window and descried 'a determined-looking little lady'. In a letter to his mother he related his personal impressions of the reception at the palace:

At the foot of the steps was my hostess, more like a green chrysalis than ever. We toiled up the staircase and through long corridors, hand in hand, to the Durbar room . . . . We had a very friendly conversation, and then came the usual anointment with nauseous attar of roses, followed by garlands, very splendid. Then she and I walked downstairs again, I holding tight to her tiny little hand, lest she should trip over her draperies and roll down to the bottom in a bunch. The little hand in question was encased in a green silk glove, with the fingers much too long.<sup>26</sup>

Staircases as a visual form of hierarchy could also serve to provoke conflict. That seems to have been the case in Hyderabad, one of the largest princely states. At the end of 1940, the Muslim ruler, the Nizam, complained to the Viceroy of having got no decent reception on his visit to the British residency in the state capital. In this state, the customary practice was that the Resident would wait for the Nizam at the bottom of the steps. But this time, the Resident still had to come running down and the guard of honour stood too late to attention: 'a studied slight offered to me,' protested the Nizam.

<sup>26</sup> Letter from Lord Lansdowne to his mother, Bhopal, 22 Nov. 1891, in P.C. Newton, *Lord Lansdowne: A Biography*, London, 1929, pp. 91–92.

The Resident, Mr Gidney, had a different story to tell. The Nizam was driven to the residency in a different car to the usual one and without the invariable red light. As he himself was the only one who could have ordered that change, Gidney dismissed the whole affair as a frame-up. What the Nizam really wanted was to get rid of his Resident. The wealthy prince rendered generous support to the British war effort and felt on ground of that permitted to enter into direct relations with the central government over the head of the Resident. However, the Viceroy, Lord Linlithgow, was not willing to depart from the accepted practice and wrote to London: 'We have to bring the little man back on the right lines'.<sup>27</sup> And that is what happened.

### **A Seat on the Right or Left Hand**

It was usual for a guest to be shown the seat of honour on the right hand of his host. In 1872, however, the Maharaja of Baroda made known that he wanted to break with the customary ceremonial. In the preceding years, relations between Baroda and the British had become extremely strained. The British had forced the state to accept their military protection, but when problems arose over the payment of these troops, they had resorted to a temporary sequestration of a sizable part of the state's territory. The prince felt deeply aggrieved over this and tried to avoid all contacts with his Resident. The situation only got worse after Maharaja Malharrao's accession to the throne in 1870. After a few years, he claimed the privilege of placing the Governor of Bombay on his left instead of his right hand when receiving His Excellency in full durbar. This refusal to show an expected act of deference was, in the words of Goffman, an indication that rebellion was brewing and that the Maharaja, like the ruler of Awadh in 1819, relied on a ceremonial privilege to enhance his position vis-à-vis the British Governor.

In a letter to the Resident, the Maharaja explained his position. He argued that the customs in his state were exceptional and not to be compared with those in other states. The reason was that Baroda had rendered very essential services to the East India Company from the time when the Company first established its sway in that part of India. Out of this early co-operation ties of cordial and staunch friendship had grown, which had resulted in the ruler's privilege to a seat to the right in his own durbar. He referred to a visit to Viceroy Lord Dalhousie (1848–56), but seemed to have been confused, as this concerned a visit and not a reception. The Government of Bombay wondered whether the claims of the Maharaja might be traced back to traditions at the court of the Peshwa, the former Maratha sovereign of Baroda. Thus the Resident was instructed to make the necessary enquiries, but wrote back that there was hardly any living witness with personal acquaintance with Peshwa court ceremonial. The Resident concluded that the general opinion

<sup>27</sup> Correspondence on this incident in 'Hyderabad Affairs 1940–43', L/P&S/13/1201 in OIOC, London.

was that the position of the ruler of Baroda at the court of the Peshwa was quite that of a vasaal.<sup>28</sup>

A glance at the residency's archives would have shown the Resident that the observance of strict ceremonial had no long history in British relations with Baroda. The first half of the nineteenth century saw many political conflicts between Maharaja and Resident, who did not waste much time on courtesies.<sup>29</sup> In 1828, the Resident wanted to present the Maharaja with a warning letter from the Governor, but the Maharaja sent word that he could not receive him. In spite of that, the Resident went to the palace after announcing his visit. On arrival at the palace, no guard of honour was in attendance, the durbar consisted 'only of the lowest rabble' and His Highness made his appearance a few minutes after the arrival of the Resident. What followed was a heated discussion with mutual recriminations and finally, with great reluctance, the Maharaja accepted the letter and abruptly called for *pan supari* to indicate that the Resident should leave.<sup>30</sup>

In 1872 relations were still strained, but British power in India had become firmly established. Therefore, the Government of Bombay informed the Maharaja that his demand to have a visiting Governor seated to his left could not be conceded and would be considered as evincing absence of due respect to the representative of British power in Bombay. Thereupon, the Maharaja replied that unfortunately he was prevented from having the pleasure of meeting Viceroy Lord Northbrook on his impending visit to Bombay. The reason was that under prevailing custom, on the accouchement of the Queen, the Sovereign should not under any circumstances travel beyond the boundaries of the state capital for a period of 40 days.<sup>31</sup> He added that it would grieve him beyond measure if the British government doubted his friendship, as in more favourable domestic circumstances he would certainly have used this valuable opportunity to discuss with the Viceroy the question of his seat in his own durbar. The Governor of Bombay answered in an icy letter that he would bring to the notice of His Excellency the Viceroy 'the circumstance which at this late hour you inform me is the obstacle to your attendance'.

Through a different channel, the Maharaja did try to contact Viceroy Northbrook. In a direct letter, not through the Resident, he explained once again why he felt entitled to the seat of honour when receiving British high officials. Worth mentioning is the great importance he attached to history, even though he could not derive much evidence from it to support his case. His main source was the book by former Resident Lieut. Col. R. Wallace. His quotations from that book are correct,

<sup>28</sup> All correspondence 'Precedence and Ceremonial 1870-74', R/2/489/75 in OIOC, London.

<sup>29</sup> See for instance Elphinstone's 'Minute on his Proceedings while at Baroda, 1820', in J.H. Gense and D.R. Banaji, eds, *The Gaekwads of Baroda: English Documents*, Bombay, no date, Vol. 10, p. 349.

<sup>30</sup> Report from the Resident (4 Apr. 1828), who sometimes without any sign of respect calls 'His Highness' by his first name, see G.B. Pandya, ed., *Gaekwads of Baroda: Maharaja Sayajirao II, A.D. 1821 to A.D. 1830: Selections from the Baroda Residency Records*, Baroda, 1958, pp. 51-54.

<sup>31</sup> The use of terms like 'Queen' and 'Sovereign' was already a direct challenge to the British who referred to the Indian rulers as 'Princes' or 'Chiefs'. The only true monarchy resided in England.



but very selective. He could refer to Wallace for the view that Baroda was the only Maratha power 'which has on the most trying occasions been invariably steady in its alliance with the Honourable Company,' and which for that reason should be treated 'with the utmost distinction and consideration'. He could also quote from Wallace's book Viceroy Lord Canning, who had praised the ruler of Baroda for his loyal support at the height of the Mutiny (1857) and elevated him to 'the Most Exalted Order of the Star of India' (1861). All these praises nonetheless stand quite isolated amidst elaborate statements about British dissatisfaction with glaring mismanagement, the unreliability of the rulers, and the urgent need of administrative intervention.<sup>32</sup>

Among the many privileges that were said to have been granted in consequence of this long-standing friendship was 'the privilege allowed to the head of state to sit on the right in his own Durbar,' as during the visits by Governor Elphinstone (1821) and Viceroy Dalhousie (1850). Although Maharaja Malharrao could produce no evidence in support of this claim, not even from the book by Wallace, he appealed to Lord Northbrook with the utmost confidence, 'that a state honoured by such men would not now be allowed to be degraded in the eyes of all India at your Lordship's hands'.

At the beginning of 1873, the Government of India instructed the Resident to inform the Maharaja of Baroda, not in writing but verbally at a personal interview, that

the question is not one of the courtesy to be shown to His Highness by the British Government, but of the respect to be shown by him to Her Majesty's representative in the Bombay Presidency, and that this a question on which His Excellency can admit of no discussion whatever.

At the same time the Resident was requested to hand over a personal letter, in which the Viceroy assured the Maharaja of his highest consideration.

The Maharaja was not willing to leave the discussion at that and decided to send a letter practically similar to the one quoted above, to the highest authority in England, the Secretary of State. However, letters to high officials in London had to pass the local government, and Resident and Viceroy refused co-operation. Therefore, the Maharaja sent his court photographer, Mr Chintamon, to London to present the letter on his behalf.<sup>33</sup>

The new Resident, Colonel Phayre, called this move 'an additional instance of the inordinate and unhealthy ideas' that the Maharaja maintained of his independence of imperial power. Phayre had been appointed in February 1873. Very soon, he advised his government to take strong measures to regain control over Baroda,

<sup>32</sup> R. Wallace, *The Guicowar and his Relations with the British Government*, Bombay, 1863, pp. 226–29, 382–84, 410, 440–42.

<sup>33</sup> Letters from Maharaja of Baroda to Governor-General, 5 Dec. 1872, and to the Secretary of State for India, 10 July 1873, in 'Precedence and Ceremonial 1870–74', R/2/489/75, in OIOC, London.

as the state was suffering from serious administrative mismanagement. In his view, the Resident's loss of influence was the heart of the problem. Phayre displayed excessive zeal, but was a bit rude and short-tempered in a situation where, to quote Copland, 'utmost tact and patience were required'.<sup>34</sup>

The Government of India followed a cautious policy and chose the approved method of an inquiry commission (September 1873). The report that the commission submitted early next year was open to more than one interpretation. Phayre and the Bombay government felt justified by the report's findings but the central government remained reluctant to intervene, especially after the Maharaja's appointment of a new dewan, the able nationalist Dadabhai Naoroji.

In the summer of 1874, Lord Northbrook addressed a last warning letter to the ruler of Baroda. He reminded him that the existence and prosperity of his state depended upon the 'fostering favour and benign protection' of British military power. He followed this up with the remark: 'My friend, I cannot consent to employ British troops to protect anyone in a course of wrong-doing'. Misrule upheld by British power would mean misrule for which the British government might be held responsible. Nevertheless, Northbrook expressed his confidence that the Maharaja would make such reforms as suggested by the commission, and entreated him to attend to the friendly advice which the Resident would be instructed to give. Yet, if the state of the Baroda administration were to remain unreformed, the only course left would be to remove His Highness from the exercise of all power.<sup>35</sup>

That was what finally happened. After Resident Phayre had clashed with Baroda's new dewan and in November 1874 had reported an attempt to poison him, the central government intervened. According to the British, the situation of gross misrule was evident and offered sufficient grounds for deposing the ruler. In January 1875 Maharaja Malharrao was suspended from the exercise of power, shortly after Phayre had been removed from his post.<sup>36</sup> Control of Baroda was no longer vested in the Government of Bombay but was transferred to the Political Department of the Government of India.

### A Chair in the Same Line or at Right Angles

About 50 years later, an interesting conflict arose in Travancore. That state lay tucked away on the south-western tip of the Indian subcontinent and enjoyed great fame among European traders because of its pepper. After a treaty with the East India Company, a Resident was posted at the court of the ruler (1800) who was responsible to the Government of Madras. Relations remained quite satisfactory from the middle of the nineteenth century, in spite of the ruler's dogged

<sup>34</sup> Ian Copland, 'The Baroda Crisis of 1873-77: A Study in Governmental Rivalry', *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 2(2), 1968, pp. 118-19.

<sup>35</sup> Letter from Governor-General, Lord Northbrook, to Maharaja of Baroda, 25 July 1874, in Sever, *Documents and Speeches*, Vol. I, pp. 270-72.

<sup>36</sup> Copland, 'Baroda Crisis', pp. 143ff. Text of Proclamation by the Government of India, 13 Jan. 1875, in Sever, *Documents and Speeches*, Vol. I, pp. 273-74.



but fruitless attempts to get his salute of 19 guns increased. During World War I the Government of India considered a revision of the table of salutes, but Travancore's salute remained unchanged, as the state had contributed very little towards the war effort, considering its great wealth.<sup>37</sup> In another respect, the position of the ruler and his state did become more dignified. With provincial governments increasingly coming under the influence of elected representatives, Travancore was placed into a direct relationship with the Political Department of the central government (1923). Henceforth, the Resident was called Agent to the Governor-General for the Madras States (AGG).

In 1926 a question was raised here about the exact place of the chair of the AGG at durbars. At a kharita durbar in the neighbouring state of Cochin, a political officer was surprised to discover that the Maharaja was sitting at the head of the table all alone and even on a small dais. On the floor to his right the AGG's chair was placed at the head of a row of guests and to his left stood the chair of the Elaya Raja (crown prince), also at the head of a row. So the AGG and the heir to the throne sat facing each other. On inquiry it was understood that the same practice prevailed in Travancore, although local officers were unable to say for how long. The usual procedure in other states was, so they concluded, that the representative of the paramount power was seated on the right side of the ruler and level with him, with everybody else sitting at right angles.<sup>38</sup>

Thereupon, the AGG lodged a protest to the dewans of both states against this practice. In his reply, the dewan of Travancore explained that seating arrangements in his state might be different from those elsewhere, but defended them as a usage peculiar to local tradition and identity. He also pointed out that though the Government of India wanted Travancore to follow standard practice in ceremonial matters, they had declared their readiness to consider objections based on past practice or other grounds. For that reason, the dewan first wanted to search both the old and more recent government records in connection with that past practice. 'Last evening,' he wrote to the AGG on 19 September 1926, 'I received a large collection of files from 1829 onwards which I am now wading through and there are more papers to come.' Apart from that, there was the special circumstance that at that moment Travancore was under a regency. The old Maharaja had died in 1924 and pending the majority of his nephew and successor, the state was ruled by the latter's aunt, the senior Maharani. The Maharani, the dewan wrote, was not prepared to concede anything that might give the impression that she was lowering the prestige of the young Maharaja.

One month later, the dewan placed the results of his investigations before the AGG. He may have gone through a large collection of documents, but the number of references to public durbars turned out to be small—and they were far from clear at that. Two durbars had been held in 1813 and both were mentioned in

<sup>37</sup> 'Revision of Table of Salutes 1917', R/2/895/327, in OIOC, London.

<sup>38</sup> Internal handwritten notes from Trivandrum Residency (Travancore) in 'Darbar Ceremonial'. R/2/884/162, in OIOC, London.

Hamilton's *East-India Gazetteer of Hindustan* (1828) and Shungoonny Menon's *History of Travancore* (1878). These descriptions gave no particulars about the place and level of the chair of the representative of the British government. The most curious piece of evidence put forward by the dewan was the engraving of a picture in the billiard room of the British residency. That engraving depicted the 1851 durbar to receive a letter from Queen Victoria and made unmistakably clear, in the words of the dewan, that the *musnud* (throne) stood alone and apart, with no seat for the Resident near it. The AGG scribbled in the margin that the engraving showed no chairs at all, and that most probably chairs were lacking, as they were unusual in those days.

Neither did references in the *Travancore Government Gazette Extraordinary* to later durbars throw much light on the position of the AGG's chair or the origin of the existing arrangement. The dewan referred to several issues of this *Gazette*, but the AGG, who took the trouble to examine the quoted pages, found the information about the question of seating indecisive. Only the more recent issues of the *Gazette* gave some more details. The *Government Gazette* of 18 June 1880 did not restrict its descriptions to the rich clothing of the Maharaja and the impressive parade of state elephants, but also mentioned that the Resident was seated 'at the top of the right hand row'.<sup>39</sup> Later issues of the *Gazette* contained the same information.

These findings confirmed the dewan in his opinion that the seating arrangements as existing in 1926 were justified by past practice. Besides, he thought it inappropriate to place the chair of the AGG too close to that of the Maharaja, as 'a chair European style, however ornate and large, will be dwarfed if drawn up alongside the silver Musnad'. The proposed change would push back the dewan, who till then had been seated at the right of and slightly drawn back from the *musnud*, and create the impression that his place had been taken by the British representative. Whereas the Government of Cochin proved compliant with adjusting the position of the AGG's chair at durbars, Travancore remained reluctant to introduce any change in the existing practice. Therefore, the Government of India decided to adjourn a decision in this matter.<sup>40</sup>

After the investiture of the young Maharaja with full powers (1931), the dewan resumed the initiative. He had a note written by a local scholar and submitted it to the AGG. That note was elaborate in detail but poor in documentation. It quoted extensively from English publications, like a colourful description of the 1860 durbar by the London missionary Samuel Mateer. After arrival, Mateer recorded, the Resident was received at the entrance of a magnificent pavilion by the First Prince and a little farther on by the ruler himself, who took the Resident's arm and proceeded to the throne. The Europeans, at the same time, took their seats in their order of precedence on chairs ranged on either side of the hall, while the

<sup>39</sup> The Extract of the *Travancore Government Gazette Extraordinary* of 18 June 1880 I saw did not have that piece of information, neither had the *Report on the Administration of Travancore for the year 1055 (1879-1880)*, pp. 84-85.

<sup>40</sup> All correspondence in 'Darbar Ceremonial', R/2/884/162 in OIOC, London.

officials of Travancore state stood behind as spectators. What becomes particularly clear from this and other descriptions quoted in the note is that till recent times, the exact location of the chair of the British representative did not require special attention. The conclusion that the Resident's chair stood to the right of the throne was most probably correct, but does not answer the question whether that chair was in the same line with the throne or at right angles.<sup>41</sup>

The evidence produced by local British officials was also far from convincing. The earliest record traceable in the residency was a collection of notes regarding ceremonials compiled by Major Hayes, who served as Assistant-Resident from 1866–70. In 1895, these notes had been revised and printed by Resident Rees, 'to preserve what is of use in it,' as he wrote by hand on the official copy. This collection contains detailed rules on salutation and seating, and lays down that at state durbars the Resident sits on the right of the Maharaja, then the Resident's wife, the Assistant-Resident and his wife, and then the staff according to rank, with the Commanding Officer sitting on the left of the Maharaja followed by the other officers of the Travancore government according to rank. However, these rules do not answer the delicate question of whether or not the chairs stood in the same line or at right angles to the seat of the ruler.<sup>42</sup> Apparently, at the end of the nineteenth century, this was also for the British no question of great importance. Nevertheless, on this very issue, a conflict was brewing in the 1930s, which forced the Government of India to intervene.

The British could not deny that the existing practice had the sanction of custom behind it, but insisted on the need for a change of that practice. First of all, they had a wish to standardise ceremonial rules at the princely courts. Apart from that, after World War I Travancore had entered into direct relations with the central government, and the British representative was raised from an Agent to a local government to an Agent of the Governor-General (1923). This enhanced dignity, invalidating any appeal to precedent, should find expression in another position of the AGG's chair, as had been the case in Cochin. The point at issue, Resident Garstin argued, was not a curtailment of the rights and privileges of His Highness, but an acknowledgement of the increased dignity of the representative of the paramount power. Garstin seems also to have been very much concerned with his own personal dignity. He demanded not only a chair in the same line and on level with the Maharaja, but also an extension of the mounted guard escorting him to durbars, and a place for his wife at the head of the row on the right of the Maharaja and himself.

The Indian side, though, set a high value on the existing practice. When the young Maharaja was invested with ruling powers, it was actually his mother, the junior Maharani, who came to exercise power through her son, who was extremely

<sup>41</sup> Rao Sahib Uloor S. Parameswara Ayyar, 'Note on the Seating of the Agent to the Governor-General in Public Durbars' (1932), in R/2/887/205, in OIOC, London.

<sup>42</sup> 'Durbar Etiquette for Cochin and Travancore' (1895), R/2/900/385, and 'Ceremonial, wearing of uniform by AGG' (1933), R/2/887/202, in OIOC, London.

gentle but lacked any independent power of will. Louise Ouwerkerk, a teacher at the Maharaja's Women's College and personally acquainted with the palace, described the junior Maharani as an energetic and ambitious woman who was continually frustrated by the restrictions imposed by her sex and age. She was ably assisted in her ambitions by Sir C.P. Ramaswamy Aiyar, Legal and Constitutional Adviser to the throne and from September 1936 dewan of the state. Sir C.P. was an outstanding lawyer and shrewd intriguer. But, above all, he was personally devoted to the Travancore ruling family and firmly determined to let the family and particularly the young Maharani have all the honours and dignities he thought them to be entitled to.<sup>43</sup> At the end of 1935 Sir C.P. decided to take on the job of defending the interests of the Maharaja in the matter of the AGG's chair.

In November 1935 the Government of Travancore published a fresh note 'On the Position of AGG's Chair at Public Durbars'. Under acknowledgement of the increased dignity of the AGG, this note advanced the earlier used argument that his promotion to Agent to the Governor-General also enhanced the dignity of the Maharaja, thus keeping existing relations perfectly well-balanced. Further, an adept reference was made to a letter by the Viceroy from 1910, exhorting his political officers to scrupulously observe ceremonial 'in accordance with ancient custom', and to avoid everything that might affect the status of the princes in the eyes of their subjects.<sup>44</sup> Also, the recent discussions in the Committee on Ceremonials (1932) were quoted, which had acknowledged the importance of local precedents in questions of ceremonial.<sup>45</sup>

As parties in Travancore proved unable to reach an agreement, the question was finally referred to the Political Department in New Delhi. In September 1936 the department informed Garstin of its decision that henceforth also in Travancore at official durbars like state banquets and garden parties

the Agent to the G-G's chair should be placed on the right hand side of the Maharaja in the same line and on the same level and not at the head of the row of chairs on the Maharaja's right hand side at right angles to the masnad.

This change, the department reasoned, implied no loss of dignity to the ruler, as the same ceremonial was observed in large states as Hyderabad and Mysore.

Garstin had his way but not in all respects. In the matter of the Resident's mounted escort, the Government of India expressed its inability to pass orders under the existing Army Regulations, and as far as the wife of the AGG was concerned, she would not be given a place at future official durbars. Garstin was instructed to inform the Government of Travancore of these decisions 'in suitable

<sup>43</sup> Louise Ouwerkerk, *No Elephants for the Maharaja: Social and Political Change in Travancore 1921-1947*. Edited with an introduction by Dick Kooiman, New Delhi, 1994, pp. 74-77.

<sup>44</sup> 'Strict Observance of Etiquette and Ceremonials in Intercourse with Chiefs and Darbars 1910', R/2/508/166 in OIOC, London.

<sup>45</sup> See also letter from dewan of Travancore to AGG, 9 Jan. 1933, with approving comment on discussions in the Committee on Ceremonials, L/P&S/13/1761, in OIOC, London.

terms', which he did with great satisfaction. Sir C.P. tried to put up a last resistance with the argument that Travancore had no state banquets and garden parties as such, but Garstin was not in the mood for a fight over definitions. In the beginning of 1937 he explained to the dewan that the decision of the Government of India was final and did not allow for any further discussion.<sup>46</sup>

### **The Order of Precedence**

As we have seen in the previous section, the British, certainly those like Garstin, were far from indifferent to matters related with ceremonial. The question of precedence in particular was a very delicate point. British India knew a so-called Warrant of Precedence, an official list ranking all government officers and other dignitaries. The Warrant was used for determining the appropriate arrival, reception and seat allocation of guests at official occasions, but had nothing to do with scales of payment. For princely India, the construction of a similar warrant was thought to be of great importance. William Lee-Warner, a prominent former government servant, commented that questions of precedence had even led to war in the period before the establishment of British power. At the end of the nineteenth century, when he wrote his recollections, they still gave rise to 'heated discussion and sullen resentment' and, therefore, he thought it wise policy that the authority to arbitrate between rival claims was vested in the Governor-General.<sup>47</sup> By inclusion of the princely rulers and their main officers into the Warrant, a gradual standardisation took place.<sup>48</sup>

At the beginning of the twentieth century, a controversy about official ranking arose in Travancore, not among Indian but among British officers. Some of them, like the Resident, the Superintendent of Police, and the officers of the local Nayar Brigade, were officers of the Government of India serving in Travancore. On the other hand, the Chief Engineer, the Director of Public Instruction and the Surgeon of the Nayar Brigade were local British officers serving the Government of Travancore. The controversy had to do with their mutual ranking.

In 1910 the Political Department of Madras, at that time still in charge of relations with Travancore state, had designed a new table of precedence for all British officers serving in Travancore. The British officers serving the local durbar felt greatly dissatisfied with their place on that table and protested in a courteous memorial. Through the Resident they let the Government of Madras know that earlier only British Indian officers had been included into the table and that for that reason local officers had discontinued their attendance at functions where that order of precedence was observed. They also dismissed as unsatisfactory the alternative arrangements that had been suggested from the end of the nineteenth

<sup>46</sup> All correspondence on this question in 'Ceremonials Travancore State', R/2/887/205 and R/2/888/208, in OIOC, London.

<sup>47</sup> William Lee-Warner, *The Protected Princes of India*, London, 1894, p. 307.

<sup>48</sup> File 'Question of Precedence', R/3/1/199, and 'Revised Warrant of Precedence for India, 1937', R/3/1/227, in OIOC, London.

century. What the memorialists wanted was an integrated order of precedence determined solely by a consideration of the importance of the department and their place in it, irrespective of whether they were local officers or officers lent by the Government of India. The new table of precedence met with their fierce resistance, as it placed British-Indian officers above local officers without reference to their specific position.

One of the points to which they took exception was the high precedence accorded to the Superintendent of Police, who was bracketed with, though placed immediately below, the Director of Public Instruction. In the opinion of the memorialists, that position was not in proportion to the importance of the police in Travancore, and related more to the situation in Madras. They were also dissatisfied with the position accorded to the Assistant Resident and the Battalion officers of the Nayar Brigade. These officers were quite junior, but took precedence over covenanted education officers, the Brigade Surgeon and the Executive Engineers of the Public Works Department, some of whom were university graduates and had a long record of service. The European judge of the Travancore High Court, to quote just one more of their objections, was placed above the Chief Engineer. Although both were servants of the local government, the memorialists suspected that the proposed ranking was determined by the high position accorded to judges of the Madras High Court. Their counter-argument was that while the relative importance of the Travancore High Court remained where it was, the position of the Public Works Department had materially increased, as was evidenced by the large number of British engineers working in that department. The memorial was undersigned by nine local British officers, among whom were the Chief Engineer, the Director of Public Instruction, the Brigade Surgeon, and a number of professors of the Maharaja's College.<sup>49</sup>

The Resident added in a forwarding letter that the question of precedence was a very sensitive one locally. He had noticed that sensitivity for the first time when the Chief Engineer had declined his invitation to dinner because he found that he had been placed below the European Judge of the High Court and the Superintendent of Police. Hardly concealing his sympathy for the hurt feelings of the memorialists, the Resident questioned the wisdom of according all officers serving the British government in Travancore precedence over local officers. In Travancore, the police department was indeed less important than that of engineering or education. And the Assistant Resident and officers of the Nayar Brigade were no more than birds of passage, whereas the Brigade Surgeon had 16 years of service, held medical charge of two battalions and ran the Residency hospital.<sup>50</sup>

In the end, the Government of Madras resolved to cancel that portion of the new table of precedence which laid down that all British officers who found a

<sup>49</sup> Memorial from certain European officers in the service of His Highness the Maharaja of Travancore, to His Excellency the Governor of Madras, March 1911, in File 'Precedence among European Officers, Travancore 1910', R/2/881/98, in OIOC, London.

<sup>50</sup> Letter from Resident Travancore and Cochin to Government of Madras, 9 June 1911, see previous note.



place in the British Warrant of Precedence should take rank before all local officers. Henceforth, precedence of officers in Travancore should be determined by a consideration of the reasonable claims of the departments to which they belonged, and of their place in those departments. However, the precedence given locally to British officers in Travancore should in no way affect their position relatively to British officers outside Travancore, as laid down in the Warrant.

The new order (No. 361 of 1911) placed the Resident on top of the list, followed by the Bishop in Travancore, the Commander of the Nayar Brigade and the Durbar Physician. The Judge of the High Court remained at the fifth position, but the Chief Engineer and the Director of Public Instruction were ranked above the Superintendent of Police. The Surgeon of the Nayar Brigade was ranked below the Deputy Chief Engineer but above the Assistant Resident, the Battalion officers and the professors of the Maharaja's College. For the moment, peaceful relations had been restored. But among British officers, too, that could not be done without 'heated discussions and sullen resentment'.

### **Concluding Remarks**

As we have seen, the British rulers of the subcontinent were involved in an official project to place all Indian princes in a large hierarchical order. Whereas earlier the position of the prince was determined on the battlefield or by the outcome of internal rebellion, under the *Pax Britannica* these dynamics were stifled in a bureaucratic classification that was eagerly watched by political officers. This development bears great resemblance to the simultaneous curbing of vertical mobility among castes. However, just as in the case of castes, the hierarchical division of the princes was far from rigid. Castes were capable of upward mobility, if their claims were acknowledged by British authorities; for instance at the occasion of the decennial census. In a similar way, the British could modify the ranking of the princes by granting honourable receptions or reducing the number of gun salutes. This differential award of privilege gave them an effective instrument of reward and punishment that could be used as a mark of the favour or displeasure of the government. So the possibility of change was not excluded, but only with British authority as the final arbiter.

As a result, the mutual rivalry did continue under the British but got displaced to another field. The Maharaja of Gwalior, as we have seen, claimed the privilege of meeting the British Governor at the top of the staircase. Yet, the chance that other princes might receive the same privilege put a strong damper on his ambitions. This mutual rivalry for ceremonial position can be traced very clearly from the discussions of the Committee on Ceremonials from 1932–34. In that committee, composed of representatives of the Political Department and the princes, it became abundantly clear that the princes did not challenge the principle of hierarchical ranking, but vehemently questioned their own particular place in that ranking. Depending on their circumstances, they appealed to the history of their relations with the British, the extent of territory under their command, or the amount of

revenue collected as arguments in favour of getting a higher ceremonial status. And virtually without exception, they all claimed an important distinction with all states immediately below them in ranking.<sup>51</sup> That stance implied that there was no joint opposition against the British, but a strong mutual rivalry for status, strengthening many British in the opinion that the obsession with ceremonial was something very typically Indian.

Here we may speculate a moment on the place of ceremonial in the larger India. In the relations of Indian rulers with British India, as the dominant state on the subcontinent, extensive use was made of rules of deference and demeanour, thus creating and preserving a separate world of interstate ceremonial. In British India, relations with individual nationalist politicians and their organisations, who were usually more familiar with the western political idiom, seem to have been more businesslike and less in need of ceremonial means of communication. Nevertheless, hierarchy was widely observed and Conrad Corfield, the last Political Secretary to the Government of India, called the independent posture of the Indian rulers a refreshing contrast to the submission and servility of many of those who lived under the British Raj.<sup>52</sup>

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, a state like Baroda could still cherish the ambition of retaining a reasonable measure of independence in the face of a growing British predominance. The ceremonial element in that relationship was not yet subjected to a strict regimentation, and could serve as a signal that political subordination to the paramount power was not or no longer accepted. The refusal by the Maharaja to offer the British political representative the place of honour to his right was part of his efforts to free himself from British intervention in the internal administration and financial management in his state. These efforts ended in dismal failure. In Travancore, in the period after World War I, the situation was completely different. That state no longer had any pretensions to autonomy in financial or military matters, but sought in ceremonial another domain to uphold some of its former power and to demonstrate a modicum of independence.

Politics and ceremonial are not separate subjects; both are types of power that should be seen in the context of time and place. The Indian states discussed here offer no material to make the case that ceremonial was entirely subjected to a political agenda or the other way round. What does show up is a hierarchy of domains of power. As the Indian princes gradually lost their freedom of political manoeuvre by the consolidation of British power at the all-India level and at their own courts, public ceremonial offered another domain where they could continue some form of resistance to the growing British influence.

Earlier, a similar displacement from the field of the military to that of ceremonial had taken place in Europe, for instance at the court of Louis XIV, where the nobility was compensated for its loss of political power with grandeur and social

<sup>51</sup> See princely comments on the 'Record of Proceedings of the Committee on Ceremonials, 1932-34', L/P&S/13/1761, in OIOC, London.

<sup>52</sup> C. Corfield, *The Princely India I Knew: From Reading to Mountbatten*, Madras, 1975, pp. 15-16.



prestige.<sup>53</sup> In India as well as in Europe, there was a centralising state bent on demilitarising and incorporating a large number of local power centres. In the Indian situation, the princes retained a substantial part of their authority in the field of revenue and legislation which—at least in theory—could form a basis for a return to the domain of political and military power. That kind of return never took place. There were indeed Imperial Service Troops, recruited as military units from the princely states, which rendered important services during World War I. And in 1921 the princes received their own political organisation in the form of a Chamber of Princes. Yet these institutions were primarily meant to support the centralising state and to express loyalty to British paramount power.

Finally, also for British government servants, like those in Travancore at the beginning of the twentieth century, official ranking represented a domain of power independent of pay scales or political influence. At the time of the East India Company, there were always opportunities for adventurers to launch their own political initiative or to make a personal commercial profit. But with the growth of an official administrative bureaucracy in the second part of the nineteenth century, these opportunities were drastically reduced. What remained was a fight for position within that administrative hierarchy, with all the attendant distinctions. Here again, the European and Indian world do not appear to differ that much.

<sup>53</sup> See Haynes, 'Rajput Ceremonial', p. 468 and Adamson, *The Princely Courts*, p. 15.